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John Free, Teacher-Librarian, Sydney, Australia: A Day in His Life

John Free is the teacher-librarian of Holroyd High School, a state school situated in the western suburbs of Sydney, Australia. He has been at the school since 1992 and began teacher-librarianship in 1977. Holroyd is a unique school: it has three separate campuses on the one site. There are nearly 600 students in its main school, about 80 adult students and over 200 students newly arrived from other parts of the world, mostly "trouble spots," in the Intensive English Centre. John's library serves all of these students. The library building itself is the first that John has worked in that has been purpose-designed (the others have been converted classrooms). It is well resourced and has lots of space. Special features include a beautiful courtyard and extensive views from the many windows. John is also interested in music and theater. He teaches guitar and bass guitar after school and works closely with performing arts ventures in the school. In his spare time he plays in a band and writes songs, plays, musicals, and funny (silly?) one-act plays for his teaching colleagues that satirize high school life. He also loves reading stories to adolescents and adults. No one, he believes, is too old to be read to.

Pride and proud are not words that I use a lot. You won't hear me say "I'm proud to be ... " or "I take great pride in ... " Growing up, I was told that *Pride* was one of the Seven Deadly Sins, rubbing shoulders with *Lust*, *Sloth*, and *Gluttony*.

Some people are puzzled-even offended!-when I say that I'm not proud to be an Australian. They regard that as an insult, a national slur. I quickly follow up and tell them that I feel *fortunate* to be an Australian. I am lucky to be a citizen by birthright in a beautiful, strife-free, easy-going, tolerant, well-off, and generally happy country.

After all, I didn't have anything to do with getting here. It was due to a happy confluence of events-social, historical, and biological-that I materialized. The immigrant, on the other hand, can lay a much greater claim to being proud of being an Australian than I because he or she did something - often a lot more than just *something*-to get here.

I am also fortunate to have become a teacher-librarian and to have been one for the last 22 years. I must admit that until the start of my career, I had never had a burning ambition to be a librarian. I did not read much as a kid, although I was a very good reader (ah, the mysteries of literacy!). I hardly ever went to a library of any sort during my school years. *Mea Culpa!*

When I left uni at the end of 1975, I was at a loose end. After a couple 'of false starts at a career I practically fell into teaching. I came upon an advertisement for a graduate teaching diploma course, which featured librarianship as a teaching method. "I can do that," I thought.

The library strand of the course was a dynamic introduction to a whole world I never really knew existed. At last, here in front of me, was a career: a career that offered expanding possibilities. Computers were just starting to make their presence felt, albeit programmed by punch-cards! New forms of media were appearing on library shelves next to books. It was like *The Jetsons* come to life!

The head of the library faculty, the wonderful Margaret Trask, was pretty down to earth. She told us that our real learning would happen on the job, when we took up our first TL position in a school. How right she was!

Talk about a steep learning curve! My first task was to simply survive! It took nearly two years for me to surface, establish an identity, relax, and really get to grips with what the job was all about-providing a service.

I recall that my first library had no furniture! My predecessor had given it all away! There were no tables or chairs, just a few scrappy beanbags. He had had the very '70s idea that kids would learn better if they could get down and get funky on the floor. The need to write on a firm surface didn't seem to fit into his vision.

In a short time, the library became very popular. In fact, every recess and lunchtime it was packed, wall to wall-kids reading, kids playing Uno or Rubik's Cube, kids watching a video they had made, kids sitting on the charge desk because there was no room elsewhere. We had storytelling days, music days, and Christmas parties. Lots of noise. Organized chaos. I loved it.

These early experiences taught me that the most important part of my job was not what I had in my library, but what I did with it. I realized that a personal, friendly style combined with a genuine willingness to help students was the key to success. The sheaf of so-called policies waved by other librarians at district meetings could easily be dispensed with. Ultimately, there was, and is, only one policy: consideration. If I am considerate toward you and meet your needs, you might be considerate toward me and others, and we'll all get something out of this experience.

I benefited by getting involved in wider school life, initiating or joining in other activities, and taking on extra commitments. I found that my teaching colleagues developed more respect for me when they saw that I was more than "just the librarian" (read: "work-shy hermit"). School became more enjoyable, more rewarding, and more fun.

And so it has continued. The ever-expanding range of information technology available to libraries has not changed the inherent nature of the job. It has given me more clout, to be sure. I now have a better chance of meeting all of my users' needs. But it's how I do the job that matters: "La bibliotheque, c'est moi!"

Schools can, of course, be very stressful places. The sheer intensity of the day, even without dramas or disasters, can be draining. At times, I go home thinking, "What happened today?" It's just a blur! But through the haze, two developments reassure me that I'm on the right track.

The first is the queue of students at the desk before school, at recess, and lunch looking for help with assignments. It is often impossible to get to them all in time. My wonderful assistant, Elaine, and I often group them together. "Who's doing the year 10 endangered species assignment? OK, come over here. Do you have the question sheet? No? Well, I've got one here." Everyone walks away happy at the end, a bit further down the road to completing the assignment.

The second phenomenon is the number of staff who come to get resources for their own children. This group of users has gradually become more numerous. My colleagues are surprised that we put as much time into their kids' assignments as we do into our own students'. On occasion, a teacher will bring a son or daughter to spend some time in our library to find what they want. One senior girl recently spent the whole day. "It's heaps better than my school's library!" she assured us. We even have a few primary school pupils now. They trot in after school to borrow and return. Their parents have seen the way we do business with their teenage kids and want their younger children to benefit as well. Some parents themselves have become borrowers too, picking up resources for their own interest or education courses.

The biggest challenge at my current school is ESL: English as a second language. Most of our students now come from the Intensive English Centre, which is on site. The local area has "grown up" and fewer students come from neighbouring streets. Most kids "train 'n' bus" to school from several suburbs away. There is no great predominance of anyone culture. We have students from every continent. Many have little or no English when they arrive. Imagine the challenge!

I now speak fluent ESL! I have become so used to decoding, explaining, simplifying, and translating that I do it automatically. To everyone. Whether they need it or not! My hands work as hard as my brain and mouth. Every assignment I design or book I buy, I "think ESL." I concentrate on the pace and clarity of my speech. All of this I have learned from watching and listening to our IEC and ESL teachers. It is a great privilege to be in a position to acquire some of their skills.

At the end of the day, that is why I love this job and why I say I am fortunate to be here. The job has given me back as much as I have put into it. Much more in fact. I have grown up in teaching. I have discovered and developed skills that I didn't know I had before I started the job. I have made many friends and (I hope) no enemies. I have learned to be more understanding and tolerant. Anyone who works with kids who battle daily through their own very limited English to get each assignment done cannot walk away without learning something about life.

When I was 16 I decided to lose some weight. There was no doubt that I needed to lose some weight, but I went too far. I didn't know it then, but I was experiencing the symptoms of anorexia nervosa.

I became obsessed with the goal of losing weight. I skipped meals, binned my school lunch, and sought out the lowest-calorie food and drinks. My calorie counter was my bible. I took masochistic delight in the empty feeling in my gut and, I have to admit, occasionally vomited what I had eaten if I felt that I had consumed to excess.

I became a numbers victim. I nervously mounted the scales every morning (you weigh more later in the day). Targets came and went as I aimed lower, ever lower. Ten stone (140 lbs.) was a key goal, an impossible dream when I first set out. Once passed, however, it was quickly forgotten. Nine stone twelve. Nine stone ten. Nine stone seven.

If I crept up even a pound I was desolate. A pound was defeat. A pound gained today meant a stone tomorrow. It didn't matter that I had to buy all new clothes. That was great! It didn't concern me that I was becoming pasty and cadaverous. I was obsessed by the numbers. My parents were worried to the point of panic and suggested medical help. I laughed it off, trying to reassure them. As I went to bed each night, though, I feared what the scales might tell me in the morning.

I soon found a way to trick the scales. If I stood in a certain way, with my weight (such as it was) distributed to one side, the scales would drop a pound, maybe two. It wasn't cheating, I told myself. I was just adjusting my balance.

At my nadir, aged 17 and 5 ft. 11 in. in height, I weighed less than nine and a half stone. To look at me today you wouldn't believe it!

Public policy in Australia today-and education policy in particular - reminds me of my anorectic phase. The numbers freaks are holding sway. It doesn't matter how pasty or cadaverous the education corpus looks, they have to aim lower, ever lower. They try to trick the scales, convincing themselves that they are in pursuit of "excellence" and "efficiency." They are strictly "bottom line." Less expense means a "better" system.

State schools are slowly being starved of money. Computers are being pumped in at one end while money to pay for essential services-water, gas, electricity, and telephones-is being siphoned out at the other.

What will the state education system look like when I retire-only 12 years from now? Will it be recognizable? Will parents be so sickened and frustrated by constant cost-cutting that they give up and send their children to already well-subsidized private schools?

I fear that this is the game plan of both major political parties. Privatization has become an anorectic obsession. Education costs. It is a huge expense to the government. "Never mind what it is worth. Think of the cost!" they say. "Why run our own system from the ground up when we can pay someone else-subsidize them-to run it for us?"

As I type, state schoolteachers are locked in battle with their employer over pay and conditions. It looks set to become a long and bloody engagement. What will happen to the state education system if teachers are not paid a just, professional salary? What intelligent, motivated young person looking for a long-term professional career will be tempted to enter the state teaching system? What will eventually happen to the entry benchmarks for teacher training courses?

Pressure on teacher-librarians and other "one-offs" (careers teachers, counsellors, etc.) in the system is already evident. We are seen as the easiest to dispense with. "Well, they're not really teachers, are they? We can get in some professional (i.e., lower-paid) librarians to do the job just as well."

Teacher-librarians are teachers! They are involved in every aspect of teaching and every facet of school life. They are pivotal members of the profession. In an age when everybody in the business is talking "information literacy" as if they knew something about it, teacher-librarians are well established as the link between the classroom and the exploding world of information technology. Who but a fool would set out to break that nexus?

Back in the '70s we saw the beginnings of a movement to conserve our national heritage. Natural spaces, wild places, and buildings of historical significance were highlighted as "things we want to keep."

What else do we want to keep? Isn't a healthy education system that guarantees quality and equality of service for all Australians something we want to keep? Or do we want a dog-eat-dog competitive system where those better positioned financially will move forward while others slip back into a "safety-net" system of third world standard? Will the much-hyped Australian values of mateship and equality be replaced by a policy of "Let them eat cake"?